

Qualitative Evaluation of the ESOL Pathfinder Projects

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Projects*

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

ABSSU: Adult Basic Skills Strategy Unit (part of DfES)
ACE: Adult Continuing Education
ACL: Adult Continuing Learning
BET: Basic Employability Training
CD-ROM: Compact Disc – Read Only Memory
DfEE: Department for Education and Employment
DfES: Department for Education and Skills
EFL: English as a Foreign Language
ELLIS: English Language Learning Instructional Services
ESOL: English for Speakers of Other Languages
FE: Further Education
HE: Higher Education
IAG: Information, Advice and Guidance
ICT: Information and Communications Technology
ILP: Individual Learning Plan
LSC: Learning and Skills Council
LSDA: Learning Skills Development Agency
PGCE: Post Graduate Certificate in Education
TALENT: Training Adult Literacy, ESOL and Numeracy Teachers
TEFL: Teaching English as a Foreign Language

1 EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The ESOL Pathfinders were launched in 2002 in 10 locations across England (with a separate Pathfinder for HM Prison Service) as part of the Government's 'Skills for Life' strategy.

The Pathfinders were established to test out and develop the core teaching and learning infrastructure for adults whose first language is not English; investigate a number of different delivery models; highlight effective strategies; disseminate and mainstream good practice.

The Pathfinders were based in:

- Buckinghamshire and Norfolk
- Burnley and Pendle
- East London and Lewisham
- Exeter and Plymouth
- Liverpool, Blackburn and the Wirral
- South Thames
- South East Coastal Counties
- Walsall with Birmingham Core Skills
- West London
- West Yorkshire
- Prisons

Individual Pathfinders differed appreciably – by design – addressing different local needs, involving different groups of partners and addressing different 'strands' of support activities (focusing on, for example, ICT provision, intensive provision, working with Jobcentre Plus, addressing the needs of those with low own-language literacy and a number of other themes).

Pathfinders supported a very wide range of practical activities, encompassing enhanced outreach with community groups, faith-based organisations and employers; developing much new and attractive learning material; and delivering learning through varied approaches (including much 'embedded' learning) in different settings.

The Pathfinders were expected to run until approximately the summer of 2003. In the event, progress in some Pathfinders was somewhat slower than initially expected and for some strands, more time was needed to realise outcomes so – with agreement and support from DfES – Pathfinders were encouraged to extend their activities until the latter part of 2003, and in a number of cases, final activities like dissemination events were still taking place in the Spring of 2004.

The pace of general change during the Pathfinders' periods of operation was very fast: major developments took place to ESOL teacher qualifications, diagnostic assessment material, information systems (such as the TALENT ESOL website) and supporting structures and systems – all in parallel with the practical work being carried out within Pathfinders. This meant that the context in which they were operating continued to evolve.

In November 2002, DfES commissioned a team from TNS and CRG Research Ltd to carry out a qualitative evaluation of the Pathfinder projects. This work was designed to complement a quantitative survey of learners being carried out by TNS and the programme of collecting and analysing management information conducted by KPMG.

Data collection for the qualitative evaluation centred on:

- Initial desk research and preparatory work (reviewing bids, background information about Pathfinder areas).
- An initial 'wave' of face-to-face interviews with Pathfinder managers, partners, co-ordinators and teachers during the early months of Pathfinder operation (December 2002-March 2003).
- A second wave of interviews, closely paralleling the first wave, in June-July 2003 when it had been expected that Pathfinders would be close to completing their activities.
- A series of brief follow-up interviews with co-ordinators during February and March 2004.

Key messages identified by the qualitative evaluation are that:

- Most Pathfinders have identified very high-levels of demand for ESOL classes – from people who have lived in the UK for many years as well as recent arrivals.

- Levels of need amongst learners vary considerably. For those with very low levels of own-language literacy there are major challenges to be overcome before any sort of competency in English can be achieved – particularly when compared to, say, those with professional qualifications in their own language and an excellent understanding of learning processes generally.
- In a number of Pathfinders it took time to reach a fully functioning position – despite what were thought to be thorough planning and bidding processes. This tends to reflect the fact that the ESOL ‘infrastructure’ was often relatively ‘underdeveloped’ before the injection of resources and attention represented by the Pathfinders.
- Several Pathfinders have faced challenges in recruiting appropriate numbers of qualified teachers, identifying appropriate venues, and developing materials. They have responded by developing a variety of tailored approaches to make the best of available resources.
- At a national level, too, some elements of the ‘infrastructure’ caused problems for Pathfinders – in particular, the later than planned arrival of the diagnostic assessment and learning materials. Both of which were important elements of the infrastructure. Many responded by developing and sharing local materials. Initial concerns about the National Test also tended to subside over time.
- The role of ABSSU in coordinating central activities, resolving queries, showing flexibility in timescales and acting as a focal point for good practice has been highly valued.
- By the end of the Pathfinder period, partnership working had emerged as a significant strength for many Pathfinders – particularly through forging links with organisations like Jobcentre Plus, employers and community groups which were not always linked effectively into learning programmes in the past. In many cases there was evidence of very successful employer engagement.
- There is now good evidence of many Pathfinder activities being ‘mainstreamed’ or taken forward in other ways (e.g. through ESF-supported programmes).
- Most of those associated with the Pathfinders value highly what has been achieved: there is a significant sense, though, that “*much more needs to be done*”.

The report draws a number of conclusions and recommendations. The key recommendations are:

- For partners within individual Pathfinders: further attention to training teachers, developing and embedding new lesson plans and materials, increased attention to rigorous diagnostic assessment approaches, continuing to share good practice and learn from experience.
- For local partnerships, where these arrangements are continuing: further work to share good practice, encouragement to engage 'stakeholders' who are not part of mainstream training and education routes (particularly employers, voluntary/community groups, Jobcentre Plus).
- At a national level, continuing work to develop further a number of initiatives still not operating to their full potential (national diagnostic assessment materials, ELLIS, TALENT-ESOL website) and continued support for disseminating ideas, learning and materials generated through the Pathfinders.

2. INTRODUCTION

2.1 Background

The strategy document 'Skills for Life'¹ was published in March 2001. It described the high priority the government intended to give to raising participation and attainment in adult skills through promoting high quality education and training to support improved literacy, numeracy and English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL). The need for urgent action in these areas had been pointed to, in particular, by the earlier Moser Report^{2,3}.

The ESOL Pathfinders were launched in 2002 in 10 locations across England (with a separate Pathfinder for HM Prison Service) as part of the Government's delivery of the Skills for Life strategy. Developments within the strategy have included:

- Introducing the national core curriculum for ESOL
- Developing and delivering intensive training for ESOL teachers who work for more than 6 hours per week
- Commissioning a new assessment tool and linked training
- Work to map ESOL materials onto the ESOL curriculum

Aims for the Pathfinders included:

- Testing the core teaching and learning infrastructure for adults whose first language is not English
- Developing and investigating a range of delivery models to meet the needs of different ESOL learner groups
- Disseminating effective practice to other teachers and providers

¹ 'Skills for Life, the National Strategy for Improving Adult Literacy and Numeracy Skills' DfEE 2001

² 'Improving Literacy and Numeracy A Fresh Start' DfEE 1999

³ Also see: 'The Skills for Life Survey: A National Needs and Impact Survey of Literacy, Numeracy and ICT Skills' DfES Research Report RR490; October 2003.

Bids were invited from suitable local organisations and consortia during the summer of 2002. Successful bids were based in:

- Buckinghamshire and Norfolk
- Burnley and Pendle
- East London and Lewisham
- Exeter and Plymouth
- Liverpool, Blackburn and the Wirral
- South Thames
- South East Coastal Counties (Thanet/Medway/East Sussex)
- Walsall and Birmingham Core Skills
- West London
- West Yorkshire
- Prisons

Individual Pathfinders differed appreciably – by design. They covered very different parts of the country, and included different groups of partners. In particular, however, they covered different ‘stands’ of support activities so that a proportion emphasised ICT-based solutions, for example, and others concentrated on intensive or vocational approaches to ESOL training (more details are given in Table 1). DfES’s Adult Basic Skills Strategy Unit (ABSSU) carried out a range of monitoring and co-ordination tasks across the Pathfinders as a whole – including convening regular all-Pathfinder meetings at which progress and emerging experiences could be shared.

Table 1: Distribution of Main ‘Strand’ Activity

Pathfinders	ICT	Intensives	Vocational	Low Literacy	Jobcentre Plus	Working with Other Agencies	Outreach	Training Teachers/ Mentors	Embedded ESOL	Flexible Delivery	Other
Buckinghamshire and Norfolk	√	√	√	√	√	√	√		√	√	√
Burnley & Pendle		√	√			√			√		
East London & Lewisham	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√
Exeter and Plymouth	√	√		√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√
Liverpool, Blackburn & the Wirral	√	√	√	√	√	√		√	√	√	√
South East Coastal Counties	√			√	√	√	√	√	√	√	
South Thames	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√		√
Walsall with Birmingham	√	√			√		√	√	√	√	
West London						√	√	√			
West Yorkshire	√	√		√	√	√	√		√	√	√

Source: TALENT (ESOL) web site for all except West London; source for West London: DfES

2.2 Pathfinder Structures

Pathfinders were typically led by FE colleges or local learning partnerships – although Exeter and Plymouth was rather different because of the leading role played by the local Council for Voluntary Service. There was some variation at a local level, but typical partnership representation centred on colleges, adult and community learning teams, Jobcentre Plus, Connexions, adult guidance, and various voluntary groups and networks (particularly those supporting refugees and asylum seekers). Other ‘umbrella’ organisations played varying parts – in general terms, depending on the strength of existing local links and established working arrangements. Trades Unions, local employers and a range of other bodies also took an active part in several Pathfinders.

In terms of actually delivering the Pathfinder activities, a series of more or less discrete individual projects were normally established within each Pathfinder (in the case of West Yorkshire, for example, a total of 53 ‘mini-projects’ emerged). With a range of partners, and a multiplicity of individual projects, local co-ordination activities needed to be thorough (and in most cases worked very well).

There was some fluidity in relation to the different ‘strands’ of activity within the Pathfinders. When submitting bids, potential Pathfinder partnerships had been asked simply to *“indicate whether the following categories of activity (the ‘strands’) would be a definite, likely or unlikely part of your ESOL Pathfinder project”*. For many, it was clear that these intentions were indicative at the time when they were submitting applications. In any event, however, these initial intentions were then ‘worked up’ more or less throughout the lives of the Pathfinders themselves.

The eventual distribution of main ‘strand’ activity is summarised in Table 1, but the overall position was more complex than this: almost all Pathfinders had, for example, some experience of delivering ‘embedded’ ESOL learning and ICT-linked programmes, not just those where the main ‘strand’ activity is indicated. In addition, some of the Pathfinders’ activities encompassed wider issues – Burnley’s attention to health promotion and awareness being a case in point.

2.3 Timing

ABSSU originally intended Pathfinders to run up until June/July of 2003, but in many cases late starting at a local level (see Section 2) made this target difficult to achieve. To overcome such issues, ABSSU agreed on a Pathfinder-by-Pathfinder basis to extend agreed periods of operation. Funding was not increased, but the time to spend allocated funds was extended – flexibility which was very much appreciated by individual Pathfinders and which contributed considerably to achieving better results at a local level, and much higher levels of learning overall, than would have been the case if initial plans had been strictly adhered to.

2.4 Pathfinders Good Practice

Even during our initial interview wave, individual partners quoted benefits from taking part in Pathfinders which included: *“We are starting a ladder of progression – developing links with the local community and building the capacity of the community to not only benefit from ESOL provision but also play a vital role in aiding delivery”*; *“the... partnership gave us very good support. They’re great, enthusiastic people that encourage participation”*; *“Working with other organisations, sharing best practice, developing links with other organisations and a chance to develop new, more relevant training materials – it’s all very exciting”*. The enthusiasm generated was certainly an important resource to draw on; *“I think we have been fairly quick in getting the operational groups up and running and getting people to get involved... I hope we can draw on good practice from the Pathfinders. There is so much to do and so little time...”*

It must be noted that a number of reservations were also expressed, particularly during our initial data collection exercise, although many related to issues like local communications, support and monitoring arrangements not strictly part of the Pathfinders themselves: *“There is a phenomenal amount of paperwork that has come down, (also) we had Individual Learning Plans (ILPs) rolled out before we had any training on diagnostics, and these are essential to ILPs.”* It was noticeable, however, that the extent of reservations usually reduced appreciably as the Pathfinders proceeded, mainly as working arrangements ‘settled in’ and benefits from the activities supported through the Pathfinder structures and extra resourcing started to become apparent.

2.5 Evaluation

In November 2002, DfES commissioned a team from TNS and CRG Research Ltd to carry out a quantitative and qualitative evaluation of the Pathfinder projects. This work was designed to complement the survey of learners being carried out by TNS and the programme of collecting and analysing management information being carried out by KPMG.

Evaluation Objectives

Aims for the qualitative evaluation included:

- Examining the processes used by each of the Pathfinders in introducing the new ESOL teaching and learning infrastructure and identifying lessons to be learnt from each Pathfinder area.
- Exploring the effects of the Pathfinder – in particular, their impact on the educational experiences of learners.
- Analysing strategies adopted by the Pathfinders to mainstream activities when Pathfinder status ceased.

This report details the findings from this part of the evaluation.

The quantitative evaluation involved collecting information from learners themselves through a multi-language self-completion questionnaire. Learners completed a questionnaire at the beginning of their course and then received a second questionnaire approximately 6 months later. The objectives of the quantitative research were to:

- Provide comprehensive profile information on ESOL learner backgrounds – for example demographic details, information on previous learning etc
- Explore learners' experiences of the ESOL pathfinders – for example, their expectations of the training, and how this matched up with reality, and any improvements that could be made.
- Measure the impact of the ESOL training on learner outcomes, in terms of course completions, qualifications achieved, and also in terms of wider economic, social and employment outcomes.

The results of the quantitative evaluation are presented in a separate report.

Methodology

Two main data collection exercises and a much briefer 'follow-up' programme were central to the qualitative evaluation. The two main data collection programmes consisted mainly of face-to-face interviews with representative samples of managers, coordinators, partners and teachers in each of the local Pathfinder areas. The first wave of data collection took place during the early months of Pathfinder operation (between December 2002 and March 2003); a second wave of interviews took place towards the close of the originally planned Pathfinder period (June – July 2003) although, as we have pointed out above, a number of Pathfinder operations were very much 'live' at this point.

The Topic Guides were developed with input from the ESOL Steering Group. Members of the Steering Group provided expert knowledge in the area of ESOL delivery as well as practical experience of working in the field. In addition TNS/CRG consulted with a number of Pathfinder staff prior to finalising the Topic Guides.

The follow up exercise was arranged for February and March 2004, because extensive Pathfinder activity continued at several locations in the autumn of 2003 and a number of ancillary activities (e.g. dissemination events) were still taking place in the early part of 2004. The follow-up was structured using a checklist to gather information about how Pathfinders had concluded their activities, what had been learned and what was being 'mainstreamed' or taken forward in other ways. In most cases Pathfinder coordinators completed the checklist and sent it to the research team; a brief follow-up visit then explored issues of particular interest, but for a number of Pathfinders it was more convenient to gather information through discussions alone⁴.

A single round of interviews for the Prison Pathfinder took place between April and June 2003; the Prison Service Pathfinder will be the subject of a separate section within the quantitative report, and findings from Prisons are not included in this report. Overall totals of interviewees for the two main data collection 'waves' at the 10 local Pathfinders (i.e. excluding the Prison Service and the 'follow-up' exercise) are given in Table 2. Opportunities

were taken to observe a number of practical training sessions and other learner experiences (e.g. using ICT materials) although the main focus for assessing learners' views has been, of course, the quantitative survey of learners.

Table 2. Interviewees in Local Pathfinders – Two Main Data Collection ‘Waves’.

	Wave 1	Wave 2
Pathfinder Co-ordinators, Managers	32	33
Partners	45	53
Teachers, support workers, outreach workers	34	51

A very wide range of additional material was made available to the evaluation team. Pathfinders' initial bids, together with notes of meetings, practical examples of training programmes, learning materials and other records have been studied. Of particular interest for the second and third phases of data collection have been emerging volumes of local monitoring and evaluation material including learner feedback (e.g. from residential courses), teachers' responses to new materials, information lodged on the 'TALENT' (ESOL) website⁵ and much other material describing the minutiae of Pathfinder operations. Close contact with DfES was maintained throughout the project and it was helpful to follow emerging patterns of Pathfinder operations in other ways too – for example, by attending regular all-Pathfinder meetings.

An interim report was produced in July 2003, based primarily on the first wave of the data collection exercise. This gave ABSSU and others early-stage feedback and prompted a number of useful discussions. A further report was produced in October 2003, drawing on findings from the second 'wave' of data collection in particular. This final report is designed to give a comprehensive review of the Pathfinder projects as a whole. The conclusions and recommendations centre on the position towards the end of Pathfinder operations, however, when many good results had been achieved and much learnt.

⁴ It was not possible to gather significant 'follow-up' information from one of the Pathfinders, where key staff were no longer available.

⁵ 'Training Adult Literacy, ESOL and Numeracy Teachers' - www.talent.ac.uk

2.6 Report Structure

This report will cover the following areas:

Pathfinder Partnerships – In chapter 3 the range of approaches adopted to set up the different Pathfinders and the various structures used to manage the Pathfinders will be discussed. This chapter will also explore the different partnership arrangements that were set up within the Pathfinders.

Teachers – Chapter 4 will cover the different patterns of recruitment that Pathfinders adopted to run the various activities for learners. The recruitment problems encountered by some of the Pathfinders will be highlighted. The chapter also covers the background and experience of teachers, as well as their training and development needs.

Materials and Resources – The materials and resources used by teachers will be discussed in Chapter 5. Teachers' views on the use of Individual Learning Plans (ILPs), Tests, and the use of ICT in learning will be discussed.

Learners – Chapter 6 sets out to describe how learners were recruited and some of the outreach activities engaged in by learning providers. This chapter describes typical class sizes and learner attendance patterns. The chapter also explores a range of learning issues, such as low own-language literacy, and the influence of cultural and other factors which can affect learners and teachers. The section ends by looking at approaches used by Pathfinders to track learning progress and progression.

Stakeholders – The wide range of stakeholders involved in the delivery of learning is discussed in Chapter 7. The discussion covers the contribution of colleges, community and voluntary groups, private sector providers, employers and Jobcentre Plus.

Strands – From the outset, Pathfinders explored a wide range of approaches to delivering learning to the diverse range of learners they worked with. The range of 'strands' are discussed in Chapter 8. These include: ICT, Intensives, Vocational and Embedded ESOL, Low Literacy, Jobcentre Plus, Outreach, Training Teachers/Mentors and Flexible Delivery.

Conclusions and Recommendations – In the final section of the report the conclusions and recommendations for the future are discussed.

3. PATHFINDER PARTNERSHIPS

3.1 Pathfinder Set Up

The pace of Pathfinder development had to be rapid. Pathfinders were expected to move from preparing initial bids, developing/delivering programmes and closing them down or mainstreaming them in around 12 months (between, approximately, the Summer of 2002 and Summer 2003). The efforts of many people within local Pathfinders and at ABSSU do need to be recognised in achieving what have typically been very good results.

Applications to set up Pathfinders were typically brief, but gave good information about proposed partners and their expertise, and the area which the Pathfinder would cover. Pathfinder managers and coordinators, and others with general responsibilities for putting bids together seem to have had a mix of motivations and anticipated benefits. For most, there were elements of *“wanting to be at the leading edge”*; and *“expecting to learn a lot from working closely with DfES and other people keen to make headway”*. Past experiences could be important too, ranging from *“We had a very good experience from the Literacy and Numeracy Pathfinder,”* to *“We wanted to be a Literacy and Numeracy Pathfinder but got turned down ... we were very keen to get this one ...”*

3.2 Partnership Structures

Subsequent meetings and briefings typically resolved any issues left over from this period, but different levels of involvement could be detected amongst some of the participating organisations more or less throughout - particularly where geographically dispersed partners were involved: *“it’s not as easy for us to know what’s going on as it is from people in ... (near the head office of the lead partner). We’re too far away; I sometimes think they forget about us (not maliciously, it just happens); and we’re too far away to be able to just pop in.”* In some cases Partners had little experience of each other’s activities and sometimes it took time to learn about each other and to work out effective ways of working together.

Most Pathfinder proposals drew on established partnerships, or at least well-established working relationships. This was complicated somewhat where several distinct areas were involved (e.g. Liverpool, Blackburn and the Wirral; South East Coastal Counties) but again these seem best viewed as a combination of established partnerships or working relationships. Some of the areas, (e.g. East London, West Yorkshire, Liverpool, and Thanet)

were able to draw on previous experience derived from acting as Literacy and Numeracy Pathfinders. So existing links amongst Pathfinder partnerships were, usually, an important resource to draw on.

In several areas (such as South East Coastal Counties) specific organisations were asked to become part of Pathfinder bids, first to increase the geographical coverage of Pathfinders, but particularly because of expectations that they would bring in significant practical ESOL experience for others to learn from. A number of relatively new links were also forged or strengthened within these established frameworks. For example in the Exeter and Plymouth Pathfinder: *“the Islamic Centre offers very important provision because it can provide a crèche as well as women-only provision. But in addition to that they have provided pastoral support and laid on a number of other activities which have made the whole offering much more attractive.”*

3.3 Partnership Working

In some cases, potential partners were identified at the bidding stage, and only later were detailed agreements made about the extent of their involvement. Post-bid discussions then led to some changes in the final arrangements for partnership working. In some cases this led to delays in the first few months after approval: *“The person that put together some of the key information was fairly distant from a lot of the work of the partners and this initially led to us putting down target numbers of students that were less realistic than they should have been.”*

Similar points arose when top-level commitment had been given, but individual teachers commented: *“nobody told the teachers, nobody thought of what classrooms might be available, or what to do about the ICT.”* By the time of the ‘wave 2’ interviews, key individuals had usually been able to ‘sort out’ the delivery of good quality learning programmes, but communications within some of the partner organisations were often not as reliable as they should have been, causing a number of delays and misunderstandings.

It was possible to detect a certain amount of tension in parts of some of the Pathfinders, for example: *“Partnership working goes up and down all the time ... you think you have cracked it and then you haven’t because someone has misunderstood something ... and people have different priorities at different times. You have to keep working at it. When it works it is really lovely.”* Equally, as with very many other initiatives, the concept of *“a partnership*

acting as cessation of hostilities in pursuit of funding” was said to be a factor “*in some partners’ minds*”. However, our overall assessment is that most partnership working has been harmonious, effective and committed. This can often be traced to an individual or small group “*pulling everything together*”. Occasional references to “*the whole thing going off the rails a bit*” can usually be traced to the lack of such a role or at least lack of links from such a group to a proportion of stakeholders.

Delays in “*simply getting started*” arose for several partnerships, often because of the need to recruit one or more dedicated staff without which the Pathfinder could not ‘take off’. This was a key issue for gaining early-stage momentum for several Pathfinders: “*Partners have been doing lots of good work individually; it probably didn’t look as if we were because until (named coordinator) was in post, there was a bit of a general vacuum, and we needed the extra resource to kick things off properly.*” Making effective progress was a significant concern at several Pathfinders during our Wave 1 interviews, largely resolved by Wave 2 – with ABSSU support for extending the period of Pathfinder operations being highly valued as removing worries that “*we might miss our targets, not spend the funds we were so keen to get ...*”.

3.4 Future Plans

Many Pathfinders were, as we have pointed out already, built onto established partnerships, or at least working relationships already largely in place. In most locations it is worth noting that these arrangements have been significantly strengthened by Pathfinder experiences. Informal links and contacts are confidently expected to develop further “*as we have got to know more about each other and what we all do ...*” but there will be continuing formal links through, for example, joint working on projects supported by ESF funding (e.g. in Norfolk).

4. TEACHERS

4.1 Recruitment Patterns

The availability of suitable staff did not, overall, inhibit Pathfinder activities, but at least initially, some Pathfinders faced challenges in recruiting enough appropriately qualified ESOL teachers. Challenges seemed to fall into three, approximately equal groups which can be categorised as:

- Major problems in recruiting: *“There just aren’t enough people around – there’s major competition for anyone with the right sorts of skills”.*
- Partners, in the main, being able to recruit teachers when they need to – *“maybe with some difficulty”*: *“We put ads in the Guardian, TES and locally: we usually get just about enough responses to make it worthwhile, although you face stiff competition – particularly from Connexions who pay more”.*
- Partners being able to cope with demand (including additional demand triggered through the Pathfinder) from existing resources: *“We’ve given our existing people more hours ...we are on the look out for more people, obviously, but don’t envisage problems, at least in the short-term”*; *“we don’t usually need to advertise for teachers...”*

Short-term challenges were subsequently overcome and effective programmes delivered widely throughout the Pathfinders. However, several teachers and coordinators suggested that teacher recruitment and development will continue to need attention in many areas for the foreseeable future – particularly if overall levels of ESOL provision are significantly increased.

4.2 Qualification Requirements

During the period of operation of the Pathfinders, the pace of revision and development of teacher qualifications was particularly fast. At the time of the initial interviews, a number of teachers were unaware of these developments, but by the end of the Pathfinder period a thorough qualification structure could be pointed to, covering a range of levels (e.g. Introductory Certificate, Diploma, Post-graduate) and providers. Whilst the pace of change caused a certain amount of uncertainty amongst teachers (and some apprehension about: *“Will I still be able to teach ESOL here if I don’t get X?”*), these developments were seen as

important and valuable by key managers and coordinators (“...helps to put things on a better footing ... should definitely improve standards”).

The DfES requirement for a level 4 qualification for Adult ESOL subject specialists was introduced in September 2003. In general there was strong support in colleges for increasing levels of expertise and professionalism. Trends towards much higher levels of formal qualification within more recent appointments were notable. Implications from this include increasing acceptance by colleges that established teachers do need significant development and support – and formal qualifications.

Non-FE providers, outreach workers and community organisations may have quite different overall perspectives, however – maybe valuing “*understanding, empathy and the ability to communicate and motivate people*” more highly than any formal qualification. Despite this there was an acceptance that volunteers would need to be drawn from formally trained individuals or they would have to undergo the necessary training in order to provide voluntary tuition. The use of voluntary (qualified) teachers was often seen as particularly valuable because of the other roles or life experiences they have: “*The teacher co-ordinator is married to the Imam. She plays a key role in supporting learners and tutors in their role. In addition, she provides a great deal of pastoral support...*”

This all led to a certain amount of reflection on longer-term recruitment and development policies, particularly at FE colleges where appreciable levels of formal qualifications are now the norm for new recruits: “*We probably wouldn’t even short-list some of the people who have done well for us in the past: do we need to be looking for more of a mix?*” Concerns were less apparent at non-college providers, who are typically very much smaller and have less well-developed recruitment and development arrangements anyway, but one did point to an acceptance that “*the ideal for us has to be the right sort of background **and** an appropriate qualification: you might understand what people are going through and how you learned English yourself – that might not be enough.*”

4.3 Tutors’ Backgrounds and Qualifications

In both of our main data collection ‘waves,’ the teachers we spoke to had a wide variety of backgrounds. Examples included individuals who started teaching in schools, then moved into FE then to ESOL; and an individual who started by ‘helping out’ in literacy and numeracy training, then moved into adult education, then into ESOL. For several others, “*I started teaching literacy and numeracy and life and social skills and adult education, and then*

moved into ESOL". Formal qualifications were varied too. A mix of subjects at first/ higher degree level; frequent PGCEs and Cert. Ed qualifications; City and Guilds 9285 and similar; were all in evidence – along with those who admitted *"my formal qualifications aren't my strong point,"* but who nevertheless might well be highly experienced and getting good feedback from learners.

EFL backgrounds were frequent, although teachers themselves could be quick to point out what can be important differences between TEFL and ESOL and several were clear that TEFL might **not** be an ideal background: *"Teaching business English to Japanese managers or German students is very different to what I have to do now. My whole approach has had to be re-thought quite a bit ..."*. Successful changes adopted by those with a TEFL background included more use of own-language inputs (where teachers or aides/ volunteers can provide it), a slower pace (particularly for those with low general literacy), simpler, relevant (*"more realistic"*) materials and exercises, and recognition that learners' personal circumstances can have a big impact on their progress.

Many teachers have non-English languages to draw on, but tend to use them rarely – if only because the chances of working with a group fluent in 'their' languages are usually low. Non-English language skills can be seen as helpful to learners: *"I have found my few words of (Hindi) very useful for people new to the country. At least I can say **something** to them that they understand. It helps break the ice. Often knowing just one word can be really helpful"*. Most teachers and managers were more cautious, however: *"Even when there is a match, most teachers prefer not to use their language skills as this often disadvantages other students in the class..."*.

What was apparent in many of the teachers we spoke to was a high reported interest in gaining further training and qualifications. This was apparent in both of our main interview waves - even more strongly in the later interviews. With experience of working with new materials, and probably higher levels of general teaching activity (many ESOL teachers are employed on a sessional basis, and increased activity through the Pathfinders had increased the sessions they had been asked to lead), strong enthusiasm for further development was apparent amongst part-time teachers in particular *"it's work I like so I'm keen to keep up to date: if there are going to be opportunities to do more, it's (financially) worth putting in the effort to learn about the latest techniques"*.

Embedded ESOL provision, where language learning takes place in association with learning in another 'specific' area (sewing, cooking, motor maintenance, business studies,

photography were amongst many examples), can pose particular challenges for teachers. Having a second tutor (or a classroom assistant) to support ESOL learning is clearly a very attractive option, particularly in mixed-ability groups, or where learners' English language standards are not high, but finding the additional funds to allow this may not be easy.

4.4 Experience

Most teachers had 5 years or more ESOL experience behind them (judging not only on the teachers we met, but the descriptions of their managers and colleagues). Several clearly have 20 years plus experience, and *"tons of practical know-how and contacts to draw on"*. We did, however, encounter several more recent recruits, and managers who were glad to discuss successes they could point to in *"recruiting people with good qualifications and training them up"* over the past 1-2 years.

A number of points can be made about experienced teachers and newer recruits. More experienced teachers clearly do have important skills and knowledge to draw on. This is valued by their managers, their colleagues, and the teachers themselves. They may well have *"varied and interesting experiences in their own lives"* which can help them relate to some of the issues being faced by the learners. What many of these 'established' teachers have not had, however, is much in the way of professional development, formal qualification and peer support (particularly the large numbers of sessional, part-time teachers). Newer teachers are typically much better qualified and formally trained: by definition, though, they tend to have fewer 'tricks of the trade' and practical examples to draw on.

This points up a wider challenge for those managing ESOL provision. With much ESOL provision coming through FE colleges (within Pathfinders and more generally) new requirements for qualifications, structured professional development, and so on is inevitable and will accelerate. This **may** inhibit recruiting individuals from non-English speaking backgrounds but need not do so – significant numbers of ESOL learners have, of course, good formal qualifications. What is more difficult is recruiting people *"with good life skills and an interest in becoming involved"* – despite the potential contribution to effective ESOL provision they might make.

4.5 Training and Development

With many teachers having been involved with ESOL training for several years, but typically having strictly limited support and development during that period, the first wave of data

collection produced ample evidence of concerns about ‘the pace of change’ amongst some of the ESOL Pathfinder teachers. *“I think many teachers would say they are in a state of confusion.”* *“There is a real fear on behalf of many teachers that they are not doing things right, and that they are not complying with things that they should. We have been feeling fairly insecure. But it turns out that we have been doing things right, just not systematically...”*; *“Teachers find it very dodgy at the moment... there is a real tension between... the learning plan and some of the learning goals... people are worried about issues like inspection, which can be very damaging if it goes against the colleges... teachers are worried about whether they have the right qualifications”*.

It was encouraging to see that these concerns had largely died down by the time of our second main data collection wave. Colleges and other providers had developed a number of ways of *“getting over some of the problems teachers face in taking up training”* – particularly by providing child care and offering financial allowances to sessional teachers attending programmes. Actual experience of using, new learning materials had also been important in building up confidence, and in most cases line managers and colleagues had *“taken us through things, explained what was going on, given us a bit of practice with everything ...”*. There is clearly, though *“plenty more to do in giving a lot of our ESOL teachers the skills, knowledge and confidence they need.”*

New training and support arrangements triggered through the Pathfinders have typically been well received by teachers: *“It’s definitely got people thinking, sharpened them up, and – this is important – often helped them realise they are doing the right sort of things anyway.”* In relation to the National Curriculum itself, most responses were again positive from those teachers with experience of it. This might not be quite the end of the story, however, as a number of managers were at pains to point out that *“the real work is only just starting”* – with a medium-term programme being needed to keep on mapping learning materials onto the new curriculum, integrate diagnostic assessment and teaching material.

There are two important caveats to this mainly favourable overall position about teacher confidence in working with the new opportunities offered by the Pathfinders. The first is the low level of general IT confidence amongst many ESOL teachers, which they raised themselves: *“We have had no training on using computers and I personally am not at all confident about using them in the classroom”*. The extent of these limitations was a surprise, but clearly many teachers are not confident about using ICT equipment themselves, and this inhibits their abilities to help learners use CD-ROM learning materials, communicate by email, and much more. This is something that has been recognised by the DfES who have

commissioned the LSDA to improve the extent and effectiveness of the use of e-learning by ESOL teachers.

The second point relates to the late arrival of national diagnostic assessment material. Even by the time of our final 'follow-up' data collection exercise, the levels of experience in using these materials remained low. The lack of national materials had prompted the development or enhancement of many local approaches. Delays with gaining access to the national materials did, however, inhibit a number of attempts to revise whole ESOL programmes. Essentially, at the time of writing this work is still to come, and one of our recommendations is that the position here be kept under review.

4.6 Teacher Engagement and Involvement

Teachers' views about the ways in which Pathfinders have been managed and supported are generally positive (particularly for those members of staff having reasonable familiarity with Pathfinder structures and approaches). There were certainly initial challenges to be overcome as a result of short timescales for planning and bidding: *"It sounds as if the Principal signed up on our behalf: then somewhere along the line communications stopped and, really, I only heard that our group were expected to be doing something by accident"*.

In practice, most teachers had not been directly involved with Pathfinder planning or management (particularly sessional, part-time teachers) and probably did not need any more information about these elements of the Pathfinder project; what they **did** value was much more detailed explanations and support about specific teaching issues, including the opportunity to discuss options and ideas with immediate colleagues. For many of the teachers we interviewed, however, the key point was a sense that ESOL has been *"a bit of an overlooked area - only just getting the attention it needs"* – so that, even where they knew very little about Pathfinder arrangements overall, extra resources and a higher general profile for ESOL were *"definitely a good thing."*

5. MATERIALS AND RESOURCES

5.1 Resources

Individual partners within Pathfinders (colleges, adult education groups, etc) started their involvement with Pathfinders with differing levels of existing resources. Learning providers (particularly colleges) typically had a wide variety of existing ESOL teaching materials, lesson plans, assessment tools and other materials available to them. The position on access to ICT was much less consistent, and the availability of other key resources like classrooms was sometimes less than ideal.

During the Pathfinder period, major developments took place across all Pathfinders – particularly in developing new materials and mapping them onto the new curriculum. The position in relation to diagnostic assessment materials and ICT was less satisfactory (and is still being worked on) but careful management within individual organisations had (usually) resolved matters like accommodation satisfactorily.

Sharing good practice and distributing materials being used between individual providers has been achieved through the TALENT (ESOL) website, and a number of local, regional and national dissemination activities. This mainly happened towards the end of the Pathfinder period. Much interest in ‘what other people are doing’ was certainly apparent on the part of coordinators, teachers and managers. Processes of learning from good practice could often be developed even further: Several teachers have found *“working your way around TALENT”* challenging (sometimes linked to the limited teacher IT skills we describe later in this section). In several locations, *“we’ve made a good start on sharing what we’ve learned, but not reached as many people as we’d liked to yet”*.

5.2 Learning Materials

By the end of the Pathfinder period, an extraordinarily wide and varied range of learning materials had been developed by the Pathfinders. Many materials had been carefully graded by level, targeted particular settings (intensive provision, workplace learning, etc) and offered learners choices in the materials they used. For particular examples see the TALENT (ESOL) website.

We collected a wide range of written material, including specific course materials, structures for assignments, and a range of diagnostic assessment material. Much has ‘recycled’ elements, drawing on previous programmes – but with developments including mapping onto the new curriculum, and detailed options and additions which range from incorporating ‘citizenship’ elements, through work taster options and specific attention to the needs of those with dyslexia.

The tutors and coordinators we spoke to acknowledged many benefits from having a much wider choice of learning materials, of much higher quality than ever before. Developing even more new material is firmly planned: *“we’ve had excellent results from what we’ve written or re-written so far: it’s given us the motivation to do a lot more over the next couple of years ...”* This will include reviewing some existing materials to ensure a good fit with the culture and experience of the learner.

5.3 Diagnostic Assessment

Diagnostic Assessment techniques were, perhaps, the most contentious elements of Pathfinder operations. Initial expectations that national materials and structures would be available relatively early in the Pathfinder period caused a number of providers not to enhance their existing approaches, and because the national diagnostic assessment materials were late arriving a range of ad hoc and fairly unstructured arrangements persisted longer than expected.

Teachers and others certainly appreciate the importance of good diagnostic assessment because it means that learners can be effectively directed towards appropriate lesson plans and have suitable Individual Learning Plans in place.

Traditionally, it is clear that most assessments have been made ‘informally’ – often using *“non-threatening chats, encouragement to show us what they can do ...”* and the like. Particularly in the first wave of data collection, these approaches led to significant concerns amongst teachers: *“I’m pretty sure what we have been doing in the past (mainly informally, checking what they can write, what they can understand) isn’t right. The only thing is, I don’t know what’s expected in the future. I’ve heard some new computer software came but I heard there were problems with it...”*

Our second wave of interviews pointed to much-reduced concerns in these areas. We suspect this was because teachers were increasingly giving diagnostic assessment

somewhat higher levels of attention as part of programmes anyway. Again, we collected a varied range of practical diagnostic assessment materials, and recognise the good results they can deliver. Many practical approaches also provide at least some information in most of the main areas of ESOL competence: *“not just listening and ticking boxes, but writing, explaining, showing comprehension and practical application too...”* Well-developed materials are available on the TALENT (ESOL) website.

National diagnostic assessment materials started to become available late in the summer of 2003, and were widely appreciated. Pathfinder activities have triggered increased interest in good diagnostic assessment processes in general, so that locally produced materials are often highly developed, and are now used much more widely and consistently.

5.4 Individual Learning Plans (ILPs)

Delays in national diagnostic assessment tools becoming available caused some complications in relation to standardising effective ILPs. In practice, a range of locally designed materials emerged, drawing on local diagnostic assessment approaches. The level of opportunity for learner involvement in generating ILPs varied, depending particularly on the learners' own literacy capabilities. Nevertheless, it is clear that many learners were readily able to set themselves targets, and monitor progress against them. Again, good examples of materials actually in use are available on the TALENT (ESOL) website.

5.5 Testing

Pathfinder partners have extensive experience of using a number of tests (e.g. Pitmans – Liverpool; college-based test – Buckinghamshire). Inevitably, particular attention was focused on the National Test.

As with the Literacy and Numeracy Pathfinders, mention of the National Test caused significant apprehension amongst some teachers during our Wave 1 interviews, particularly amongst those without direct experience of the test.

By the second wave of interviews 'blanket' concerns about the National Test amongst teachers had mainly died away. The number of learners taking the test was not large, but most ESOL learners were positive about taking the Test, valuing a *“recognised certificate”*

and often performing well. Such findings are reflected in the quantitative evaluation report. The West Yorkshire Pathfinder identified an important series of learning points in relation to the National Test, which are reproduced in Figure 2.

Figure 2: Summary of Experiences of Administering the National Test to ESOL Learners

- The need to teach learners how to identify key words in the instructions on the test paper;
- The importance of helping learners to understand the layout of the text and the types of questions they are likely to be asked;
- The need to help learners understand how to manage their time more efficiently during the test;
- The importance of learners having several opportunities to sit mock tests under test conditions;
- The importance of action planning with learners after each mock test to help them address the areas they have found difficult – even if they have achieved a pass;
- The importance of not entering learners for the test until they are able to score 75% consistently in the mocks;
- The benefits of taking learners to see the room where the test will be taken;
- The benefits of being able to take the test in community bases that are familiar to the learners;
- The benefits of introducing learners to the invigilator;
- The need for staff to ‘manage’ the gap between the end of a course and when the learners take the test;
- The benefits of greeting learners at the door when they arrive to take the test;
- The need to alter the content of entry level programmes to help learners learn from an early stage the skills they will need for the level 1 test.

Source: West Yorkshire Pathfinder Internal Evaluation

Overall views of the National Test remained complex, not least because of a number of surprising results not, apparently, correlating with other tests nor with teacher assessments (see Liverpool local evaluation report). This led to a number of concerns that *“the Test might not work properly for at least some groups of ESOL learners.”* These are essentially technical matters, however, which have been addressed by the QCA and awarding bodies.

5.6 ICT and other Electronic Equipment

Concerns about access to ICT equipment in general was a significant feature of our Wave 1 interviews, although the position had already improved by the time Wave 2 interviews took place. *“We’d like to do more testing and use IT-based learning and materials, but we haven’t enough computers (and some of the ones we’ve got aren’t properly networked)”*. *“I think the idea of ESOL through ICT would go down really well with a good number of our learners (they see knowing about computers as the key to getting jobs), but again, we haven’t got the kit”*.

Constraints did arise, however – particularly in relation to some teachers’ IT skills. Largely unforeseen, it became apparent that there are significant levels of need for basic ICT teacher training in order to be able to use the facilities now routinely available. The lack of confidence of a number of ESOL teachers in ICT generally needs to be borne in mind and increasing use of computer-based diagnostic assessment tools is likely to pose yet further challenges in the future.

ELLIS software, a multimedia CD-ROM learning package aimed at adult learners of English, was made available to many of the Pathfinders, and uptake was good. Often ELLIS was used in conjunction with other software resources, to extend the range of resources available. ELLIS was evaluated by a number of the Pathfinders and in general was found to be a very useful adjunct to other ICT packages.

All in all, ICT emerged as a positive aspect of Pathfinder experience – although a key conclusion must be that there will be a continuing need for steady investment in ICT equipment, software, learning materials and teacher training for some time to come.

5.7 Other Resources

With demand for ESOL provision in the Pathfinder areas being consistently high, pressure has been placed on a number of other resources needed to deliver effective programmes. These included available classrooms and other teaching materials. *“We’re running at up to 16 per class, which isn’t ideal, but there isn’t another classroom”*; *“When looking ahead one of the things we will really have to think about is where to put people. There is certainly demand: we could probably find the teachers – but where would we put them?”*

Options for resolving concerns clearly vary. In some college settings, achieving higher levels of use of existing facilities was eminently achievable through more structured timetabling – but this may call for compromises and adjustments on the part of others, which are not necessarily easy to negotiate.

Some interviewees associated with Pathfinders were quick to point out “*there shouldn't be a problem: we ought to be able to use libraries, community halls – whatever: it would help us get closer to where people actually live, and avoid some of the 'stigma' of 'having to go to college'*”. These are attractive concepts in many ways, but not necessarily easy to deliver: learners are entitled to expect safe, modern, attractive, warm environments with a full range of learning materials. ICT presents a particular issue – with increasing attention being given to using ICT learning, it becomes important not only to have ‘the right kind of kit’ but also guarantee appropriate access to software, CD ROMs and other materials too.

6. LEARNERS

6.1 Learner Recruitment and Outreach

Recruitment to programmes was, inevitably, an issue of great interest throughout the whole of the Pathfinder operations. Pathfinders typically reported, *“there’s certainly no shortage of demand – either from settled communities or recent arrivals”*. In the vast majority of cases, Pathfinders were able to recruit at least as many learners as they needed. The position was even more positive during our wave 2 and ‘follow-up’ interviews than in the ‘Wave 1’ data collection. Indeed, many providers became worried about trying to meet the increasing levels of demand. The demand for provision was a combination of existing levels of demand (*“the college has had a waiting list for a couple of years now...we know there is massive demand from very motivated people”*), together with additional good support coming through from within partnership networks: *“The refugee council have linked us up with loads of people: they also helped to build up learners’ confidence in what we can do”*.

However, in a few Pathfinders, uptake took a little more time to gain momentum. As with recruitment to many other forms of learning, word of mouth is crucial: *“We routinely tell people who come on the course ‘tell your friends’ – and lots do come forward just through that”*. This finding was supported by the quantitative research which found that almost six in ten found out about the course from family and friends.

Good outreach certainly played an important part in achieving good levels of learner interest but might *“take time to build”*. Outreach work has proved effective – albeit sometimes deliberately constrained if only because target numbers of recruits tended to be met without it: *“We took on a couple of outreach workers, they know the local communities and who to contact: they get to talk to people just by standing by the Sari stall in the market....”*. Good outreach, too, helps gain the confidence of ‘difficult to reach’ groups – for many Pathfinders this includes focusing particularly on the needs of Muslim women who are *“very cautious about doing anything at the college...mixed classes aren’t on”*.

With good support from a number of employers already, recruitment through the workplace is a promising route for attracting ESOL learners. The only negative experiences so far, seem to have come from a few employers who are thought to have appreciable numbers of ‘illegals’ amongst their workforces: *“One of them just shut the door in our face. I have a strong suspicion he doesn’t want anybody from the outside seeing who he’s employing. The*

workers (at another location) weren't much better – they were very keen on the principle of ESOL, but they won't fill in any registration forms, they keep on asking me, through the foreman, 'is this woman from the government'? 'Is she from immigration'? 'Is she something to do with benefits'?"

Our overall conclusions indicate that good levels of learner take-up were achieved by Pathfinder programmes – *“although sometimes we had to work quite hard at it”*. Indeed, once momentum had started to build, it became clear that considerable latent demand could be triggered.

6.2 Effective, Varied Provision

It has been interesting to note a very wide range of courses that Pathfinders have delivered. As well as successful individual initiatives (working with employers, ESOL and photography, residential targeted at particular groups) the range of courses delivered by Pathfinders has been striking – meeting the requirements, at least in principle, of the wide range of potential ESOL learners known to be 'out there' and seeking support. For example in just one Pathfinder ESOL courses have included:

- Basic English (different levels)
- Numeracy and ESOL
- Three hour drop-in taster workshops
- ESOL and swimming
- ESOL and sewing
- ESOL and IT
- ESOL and office skills
- ESOL linked with women's groups.

Course characteristics varied considerably particularly in relation to their length and intensity – driven by perceived learner needs (*“what's best for the people out there”*) and the availability of resources (including teachers, classrooms, materials and access to ICT and other facilities). In some cases, particularly for learners with very low own-language literacy and little or no English vocabulary, non-intensive courses of 12 months (sometimes more) were seen as *“the only way to go”*. For other groups, however, *“We seem to find them (short, month-long intensive courses) being more attractive to a lot of the learners (particularly refugees/asylum seekers); they are also seeming to get particularly good results too”*. Other

views pointed to the value of, say, an initial intensive (maybe 1-week) programme which *“gives them a basic tool-kit – maybe something they can build on day-to-day, all being well”*.

Many providers (not just colleges) find it convenient to run ‘conventional’ classes, maybe linked to academic terms. This helps with allocating rooms and tutors, lesson planning, and so on. In practice, however, ‘roll-on/ roll-off’ designs have an essential part to play, and fit many learners’ requirements better than more defined programmes. *“Many of our learners are pretty mobile; they don’t just stay in one place. And for new arrivals, we like to get them started – it can be very dispiriting to say ‘come back in September’.”*

Working with employers – often with ESOL provision being delivered in the workplace – has been successfully trialled by several Pathfinders. *“[People working in the catering trade] are a particularly hard to reach group, because of the hours they work... this year we are trying something new, on-site provision in the workplace. This is particularly useful to the learners as they are unable to attend in-college classes because they work 6 or 7 days a week and a lot of hours...”; “A couple of the local employers [agri-food industry] are fine about it, [using workplace facilities for ESOL training]. They use people on short-term contracts and want them to work hard...but they can see benefits for all concerned if the people have better English language skills. But they wouldn’t want them going off to college...”*

By the time of our ‘follow-up’ data collection work, many successes had become apparent, bringing benefits for both individual learners and employers. Some of the more ambitious objectives (e.g. helping learners gain work in the health care sector in Burnley) were turning out to be more challenging – but inevitably results are likely to take longer than those set for, say, learning programmes alone. We think it wrong to abandon more ambitious exercises like these, but do recommend (Section 9) careful monitoring and efforts to share good practice.

6.3 Class Size

The information we have on class sizes points to a fairly wide range: 12-15 might be typical, but there were examples of smaller groups and some appreciably larger ones too. In most cases larger classes were recruited at the beginning to compensate for an inevitable drop-off in numbers. This range of class sizes is more or less identical to the findings from learners in the quantitative research. A number of teachers pointed out the problems which arise with large group numbers, depending to some extent on the groups they are working with: *“Big mixed groups are a big problem. Some people probably need 1:1; they should never be in*

big classes. You just have to do the best you can. Sometimes other people in the group will help out. But some people probably just miss out.” In several cases the real ‘saving grace’ in relation to class sizes is simply the size of the classroom: *“I know there are larger classes, and they probably want me to take on more. But once we’ve got 12 in the room, that’s pretty well it”*.

6.4 Attendance

Although most programmes readily achieved target numbers of enrolled students, attendance was sometimes a problem. No clear patterns behind this emerged. Some students clearly have a range of personal issues to address (*“taking children to the doctor, appeals, bureaucracy of most kinds ... it all has to be dealt with, and it all takes time”*). For others, simple logistics could play a part (*“they used to come together in a car ... the car broke down ... they went missing for a month...”, “...only one of the group was confident enough to use the buses: she was ill for a while, and the others decided to wait until she got better ...”*). Less satisfactory from a provider’s point of view was evidence that a proportion of learners were enrolling at several different programmes *“we think, to be sure of getting onto one course – they’re very keen.”* By the time it became clear these individuals were not likely to be attending others might, of course, have been turned away.

6.5 Learner Diversity

The extraordinary variety of learner characteristics means that making too many generalisations is dangerous. One college alone, for example, identified at least 66 language groups it caters for, and within individual language groups there may well be several different levels of need. It is also important to recall that, apart from sitting in on a small number of teaching sessions, we were not collecting any information from learners directly, but rather gathering information about learner characteristics from teachers, co-ordinators and administrators. Nevertheless, a range of important issues was certainly raised.

To start with, a number of decisions had to be made about what was, and was not, ‘an ESOL need’. For instance, Patois speakers, particularly from the Caribbean, usually were deemed eligible for ESOL support. Irrespective of these ‘behind the scenes’ debates, all learners were typically very enthusiastic indeed about taking part in the ESOL courses they were experiencing. *“Many of the learners I work with are very keen to learn. They are also very*

grateful for any help and input we can provide. I find it incredibly rewarding". As we have said most information about learners will come through the quantitative study being carried out by TNS, but one example of what can be achieved is given in Figure 3.

Figure 3: Learner Case Study

S is a 21-year-old woman from Pakistan, who arrived in the UK in 2001 and has a young baby. She never went to school in Pakistan and cannot read nor write in her own language. She lives with her husband's family, native Punjabi speakers whose English is poor. S was enrolled on ESOL for Life (Women) in the early part of 2003. When starting the course, it was clear that she had a very limited grasp of English – and indeed, had never learnt to read and write at all, not even being able to hold a pen properly.

S had to start by learning very basic vocabulary and the alphabet: on the very first lesson, she spent time learning the names for the body parts and the first five letters of the alphabet. Her overall learning process was expected to go slowly, but the next day S came to class able to recite the whole alphabet and write it out in small and capital letters: the night before was apparently spent with her husband helping her to learn this basic tool for literacy. With a lot of patience, humour and admiration from her classmates – and a fair bit of additional support from the college – S is now able to follow and participate in simple conversations, she can read and write her own personal information and can read simple words and text. She can also now use the computer for typing.

Source: adapted from material produced by Buckinghamshire Pathfinder

One major challenge has been working with learners from a wide range of backgrounds and ability levels. *"We range from learners who are highly literate in their mother tongue and hold professional qualifications, to those with major literacy problems who require a high degree of pastoral care. We have to cope with a mix of transient and settled communities. I think everybody benefits from coming, but I fear some benefit a lot more than others"*.

A linked theme for many Pathfinder partners is responding to the varied pace at which different groups of learners progress, or are thought likely to progress. This may well be due to different learning backgrounds: *"they're educated, sophisticated people; they inevitably get through the material much quicker than people without much experience of any education or training."* Mother tongue issues have also arisen, however: *"Just think of it the other way. I bet you'd be able to learn Spanish or Portuguese (with the same alphabet, general structure, and so on) much faster than you could pick up Mandarin."*

Some learners with very high-level qualifications presented significant challenges, as well as opportunities. *“We have a couple of trained surgeons, working as waiters at the moment. They’re very good at helping other learners in the group, but they keep asking for help in getting into the system here. You can’t help sympathising with them, and we do try to help ... but things are very complicated, and it can take a lot of one-to-one time to do anything useful.”*

6.6 Low Own-Language Literacy

Repeatedly, low levels of own-language literacy make it difficult for learners to progress quickly. In practice, all Pathfinders had to address this issue, not just those formally considering the low literacy ‘strand’. Many of the Pathfinders already had considerable experience of helping people with low own-language literacy and practical suggestions were discussed and shared at Pathfinder Meetings organised by ABSSU.

Additional support (through volunteers or aides) can make important differences, but staff resources in general may simply not be available to give learners with very high levels of need the support they really require. *“Many of the students are off-the-scale in terms of ESOL. They are seriously pre-entry; they have no formal education and have huge learning needs. They are just familiarising themselves with the idea of learning and the learning environment. I think the only way to teach them is to give them literacy in their own language first – but we do not do that!”*

Very low levels of literacy (and to some extent numeracy) are having other implications too: written diagnostic assessment tools may well be difficult to use effectively because literacy in any language is low. Similar concerns arise with ICT-based tools – usually because of lack of familiarity with characters and symbols, not because of the use of ICT itself: *“people pick up using computers quickly – and they like to use them, even if they’ve never seen one before”*. Problems come simply because *“they can’t understand what’s on the screen.”*

6.7 ‘Issues’ for Learners

Learners may also face very difficult personal issues, ranging from recent traumatic events through to recurring problems with obtaining housing, employment, benefits advice and much else. *“Some of the groups have been through amazingly traumatic events, some may*

have witnessed members of their families being killed... it makes you think carefully about how you work with them... it is terribly rewarding working with these learners but sometimes it can also be very stressful... you have to be very sensitive to this kind of thing."

Teachers (and volunteers and support workers, where they become involved) will typically try to provide support or refer-on individuals appropriately, but have to recognise their limits. *"You have to recognise that some of them have been through very tough experiences indeed ... and it's often not over: they have to cope with the whole range of housing and benefit issues, all the paperwork needed to establish their (refugee) status...they're keen to do well at ESOL, but other things can sometimes get in the way".*

From a teaching point of view, dispersal and disruption can frequently pose problems, although not necessarily showing up in numbers of learners. *"At one level we are not really impacted by the dispersal policy. As soon as they are dispersed, others come in. We just cannot meet the demand..."* For learners, however, the position is almost certainly unsatisfactory. Teachers were clear: *"She had to miss about half the lessons because of her appeal - it's stopped her learning much...[she] has been moved to another part of the country after 5 weeks on the course" and "He'll be very lucky to carry on with anything like this ... he'll probably have to start again..."*

6.8 Cultural Factors

It is also important to note particular characteristics of different groups. This represents both challenges and opportunities. *"One of the groups I work with is Bengali ladies. They needed to learn English because they were learning to drive. This was an opportunity to start teaching them in their homes and at the community centre... there is no way this group of learners would consider going onto a traditional course..."*

Teachers are highly empathetic to different cultural norms and characteristics, but several reported the impact of low aspirations and the frustrations this can bring: *"Many of the women from certain communities are very constrained and limited in their educational horizons... I am always pointing out that they have other choices... but they have no aspirations, but it is also that they want to find work quickly and that being, say, a nursery teacher would take many years. Also being a childminder means that you can work with your own community and that may be more acceptable culturally."*

6.9 Settled Communities and New Arrivals

For most Pathfinders, there are important differences between settled and recently arrived/transient populations. This will typically make an important difference in relation to some of the personal problems which groups like refugees face. Providers may have to be careful to manage provision where there is a high level of overall demand: *“Refugees are usually very keen; we direct a lot of support to them. But we have to be careful the settled communities who are keen too, and who have put their names down on the waiting list, don’t see recent arrivals as queue jumpers”*.

It is wrong to make too many generalisations about different levels of need between settled and recently arrived communities. As well as new arrivals with major language literacy/numeracy needs, there are clearly significant numbers of recent migrants for whom teachers perceive: *“they are very well educated people, very motivated and well organised: given basic ESOL support, there are plenty of jobs for them – just think of all those vacancies in the Health Service”*. On the other hand, *“our learners in the restaurant trade have often been living and working in the area for 10 or 20 years... they demonstrate it is possible to work in this country with virtually no English”*.

Many providers pride themselves on being able to rise to challenges like these, however: *“In one class I teach we meet in the Chinese restaurant. There is no way they could possibly attend an in-college course”*.

Different patterns of learner recruitment from settled communities and new arrivals may be needed. Some members of settled communities are known to be very hard to reach (for example those working in the catering or clothing industries, and Muslim women), and increased attention to *“doing something about these groups – things we’ve wanted to do for a while”* were given high priority in several Pathfinders. On the other hand, many providers have been operating *“more or less to capacity for a while now – with a waiting list – mostly from settled people.”*

For most Pathfinders, recruiting from new arrivals has needed relatively little effort: *“while they’re at ... (centre) ... they’ve got precious little else to do”*. There are also good levels of inherent motivations to learn amongst recent migrants, which we have noted already. It is clear that there are ‘hard to reach’ groups amongst recent arrivals too. Perhaps predictably, *“you’ll never get to the illegals: it might be a pity, but it’s a fact of life.”* Equally, some groups are likely to be very mobile (e.g. EU nationals on short-term contracts in agriculture) so that

arranging good ESOL provision is a challenge before they move on. All of this is in addition to similar challenges with some women's groups which apply to the settled community and others who rapidly absorb themselves into established networks of friends and family *"where they get the support they need, and maybe don't need much English in the short term."*

6.10 Tracking and Progression

By the time of our 'Wave 2' and 'follow-up' data collection exercises, it had become apparent that levels of learner progression into further forms of learning after the Pathfinder programmes was good – with a range of options being followed. For most partners, however, this was familiar territory: *"We usually have great retention on ESOL courses (I'd say 75% would be poor for most)" but you do have to keep an eye out for people being deported or dispersed. What we always try to do is phone up or ask their friends if they haven't been for a couple of sessions. Sometimes it's just getting sick like everybody else and they pop back in when they're ready"*.

We gained most information about learners continuing with the provider who delivered their Pathfinder training – particularly colleges. Evidence of learners being encouraged to transfer to other providers was not particularly high, but we are aware of no reservations about patterns that have emerged. Personal links with staff, and confidence in what a particular provider offers are important strengths for students to draw on. Colleges in particular can offer a wide variety of progression options – most obviously into vocational learning routes to support improved employment prospects.

A key issue influencing which learning route students have followed was, clearly, the levels of achievement learners could point to as a result of their ESOL programme, and this varied widely: *"They're mainly older women, they've been in this country for 20 years without speaking more than a couple of words of English – they'll be better in a year, but maybe not much better"*; *"These are bright people: they've progressed through ESOL pretty quickly, then I think we could put them quickly on to English language Basic Skills..."*; *"Quite honestly, you're talking about people with professional qualifications and a lot of ability: we plan to offer them the full Menu after this programme (or maybe the next level up): - GCSE and A levels, entry to HE if they want it..."*.

It is clear that there needs to be opportunities to continue with ESOL learning for significant numbers of learners whose English remains at a low level, whilst offering opportunities to

progress onto educational or vocational routes for many others who are more skilled and confident in English (particularly through FE colleges). In addition, the importance of excellent networking and 'handover' when learners do transfer to different providers is apparent regardless of the learners' rate of progression.

7. STAKEHOLDERS

We have said already that a high proportion of our interview data from all key groups of stakeholders (particularly in the second wave) has been positive about Pathfinder performance – in many cases simply because *“it puts something important into the spotlight”*. This section further explores stakeholders’ Pathfinder experiences.

7.1 Colleges

Colleges have had the opportunity to increase their teacher training, develop new learning materials, increase the range of courses they offer and generally develop their ESOL capacity as part of the Pathfinders. In general, they are in a much better position to deliver significantly higher numbers of much better courses than they were before the Pathfinders. This position has not always been easy to achieve, and appreciable challenges sometimes remain – even to resolve what is largely *“unfinished business”* from the Pathfinder programmes: *“We have some excellent handbooks and exercises now; the teacher training has been very popular – overall I’m very glad we got involved. It’s just that there are still problems with the IT, we ought to be sending even more teachers for training...we’re not properly sorted out with the National Test (and the diagnostic assessment tools) ... and so it goes on.”*

Despite generally very favourable experiences within colleges, outsiders’ views of college performance as part of the Pathfinders have sometimes been more guarded – for example in perceptions of their ‘true’ capabilities for providing courses on a roll-on/roll-off basis or outside conventional term times (most notably through the summer break). Colleges – not unreasonably – point out that *“ESOL has to fit in with everything else”* and that *“we are a lot more flexible than we used to be – but teachers are entitled to holidays too”*. The overall conclusion is that colleges are increasingly able to offer good quality ESOL learning experiences, in a much more flexible way than might have been the case some years ago – although in comparison to some reported ESOL needs, there may be a way to go yet.

Working patterns between colleges at a local level have also shown varied performance, and appeared to depend on their previous experience of partnership working and the level of classroom support they have available to allow them to take time out of the classroom. For example, they ranged from what seem to be very good examples of *“sharing information and*

playing to each others' strengths" through to positions where *"links haven't really gelled – we don't talk to each other much"*. Local formal arrangements vary considerably, however, and issues like whether one college has had a clear leading role within a partnership seems to play a part, along with straightforward issues of distance between colleges. Local dissemination events have often brought together key people from different colleges effectively – both from within Pathfinder partnerships and more widely.

Looking at links within the FE sector more widely in relation to ESOL, the opportunities offered by the TALENT (ESOL) website for sharing materials, views and experiences deserve particular note. Many ESOL practitioners are now active users of and contributors to TALENT.

7.2 Community and Voluntary Groups

Many community and voluntary groups have proved themselves active and enthusiastic participants in the Pathfinders, albeit not usually in particularly 'central' roles. The roles they have fulfilled have varied – most frequently being active in outreach work and contacting groups who have typically been very 'hard to reach' in relation to conventional learning activities. Participation in steering groups and management structures has clearly been valuable in 'shaping' the views of other organisations: *"Helping officials understand what's really out there, what it's really like to be a non-English speaker in this country"*. Many groups (not least those with religious affiliations) also have a credibility and acceptance that may be hard for 'official' organisations to achieve.

The Exeter and Plymouth Pathfinder proves that voluntary and community groups can take a leading role in managing and coordinating ESOL provision. Examples of successful volunteer input both here and in a number of other Pathfinders include outreach work, contacting 'hard-to-reach' groups and participation in steering group and other management structures.

Voluntary and community groups certainly played active and valuable roles within Pathfinder activities. They have specialist expertise to offer other partners and they are - perhaps uniquely – capable of engaging potential learners who might not otherwise consider taking part in ESOL learning activities at all. There is some evidence that voluntary and community groups have benefited from Pathfinders too, for example from building up their own capabilities and links with other bodies. The emphasis within the Pathfinders on fairly formal, structured approaches to ESOL learning has tended to lead to community and voluntary

groups fulfilling outreach and support roles, however, with most teaching and direct learner support being focused through established, 'professional', education and training routes.

7.3 Private Sector Provision

Private sector learning provision associated with the Pathfinders was mainly limited to delivering BET courses on contract to Jobcentre Plus (e.g. in East London and Walsall). This provision is well established and no major problems were encountered in aligning Pathfinder activities with it.

Some private sector provider characteristics have to be borne in mind: in particular, they bid for work competitively, and so may be reluctant to share materials and contacts freely (although the materials we did encounter from these sources seemed to be of at least as high a quality as others). Equally, whilst providers readily form their own views about what is appropriate for particular groups of learners, they must ultimately follow agreed programmes negotiated with Jobcentre Plus or other funders.

Private sector learning providers are known to be active in delivering a number of other publicly funded programmes (e.g. WBLA, Modern Apprenticeships, and Employment Zones). Accordingly, there may be a case for involving private sector providers more fully in future ESOL planning.

7.4 Employers

Several teachers expressed a degree of surprise about how positive employers can be in supporting effective ESOL provision. However, employers supporting Pathfinder activities have tended to come from particular groups – for example, the agri-businesses who have been involved with aspects of Pathfinder working in Norfolk and East Sussex. Therefore, a general assumption regarding the enthusiasm of employers cannot be made, although the initial signs are encouraging.

Even without any altruistic commitment to general 'good practice' in relation to upskilling their workforces, real benefits from ESOL programmes are eminently attainable for employers. Effective ESOL provision increases the ability of employees to act on spoken work instructions, understand at least some written material (e.g. in relation to product packaging) and be more confident that Health & Safety performance will not be impaired by

individuals' inability to understand simple instructions (e.g. in relation to using machinery safely).

Those employers who did support the Pathfinders mainly sought ESOL learning relevant for specific jobs, not wider language skills – in settings ranging from large-scale food processing factories to Indian and Chinese restaurants. In Burnley, health sector employers were involved more widely as this project sought to address opportunities for helping ESOL learners develop the skills needed to gain work in that sector. Employers were typically unwilling to pay staff for training – but this was not always the case, for example in arrangements where *“we pay for an hour, they give up an hour of their own time”*.

In practice, it has been fairly straightforward to make a business case to appreciable numbers of employers for getting involved with ESOL teaching through the Pathfinders. Individual employers may even be prepared to act as a focal point for contacting potential trainees employed by others (e.g. in the catering trade in Liverpool).

However, employers' views do vary. Lack of support (even opposition) has been apparent, particularly amongst employers whose employment practises are questionable: “people round here will tell you he’s a rotten employer – doesn’t pay the minimum wage, lots of stoppages ... I doubt if the Health and Safety is up to much ... He won’t meet us ... someone I know who used to work there says ‘he probably doesn’t want people to be able to check up on their entitlements’ ...”

When workforces are highly mobile (agriculture is a particular example), practical difficulties in delivering programmes certainly arise, as people move to different locations to work, maybe at short notice. Because of their readiness to work long hours to earn as much as possible, trainees may well require provision to fit around their shifts and working patterns. Nevertheless with ‘the right kind of employer’, the Pathfinders have demonstrated important opportunities for linking good-quality ESOL learning with employment - in a range of settings.

7.5 Jobcentre Plus

Jobcentre Plus staff have been involved in a range of Pathfinder activities – whether formally as part of a ‘strand’ or through other routes. Although people in the settled community often have many years of successful employment behind them despite very limited written or spoken English (e.g. in the catering and clothing trades in East London) poor English skills represent a major constraint on recent arrivals' chances of getting a job, and of many

members of the settled communities' ability to change jobs appropriately and respond to structural and economic change.

One important success for Pathfinders has been training front-line Jobcentre Plus staff (e.g. in Liverpool) to help them understand some of the constraints faced by recent arrivals in particular in gaining work. There is also appreciable interest in recruiting individuals from ESOL programmes as Jobcentre Plus advisers over the medium term.

Pathfinder activities do seem to have supported Jobcentre Plus goals in a number of cases. Modest ESOL support has significantly increased individuals' employability, confidence and abilities to deal with the technicalities of application procedures and 'officialdom'. Some 'easy hits' have clearly been achieved, particularly gaining work for new arrivals who are well-qualified and highly motivated (although questions have sometimes arisen over whether the kind of work they gain fully reflects their skills and qualifications).

Nevertheless, a number of limitations do have to be recognised. Jobcentre Plus options (particularly the 'Standard' BET programme as opposed to the ESOL version of BET) do not always align well with ESOL learners' varying levels of need; at a local level, effective accommodations have often been achievable, but strict adherence to the requirement, say, to make a set number of formal job applications per week or month can be problematic for a proportion of ESOL learners: *"In practice, she's never worked outside the home; she speaks no English at all; any form of writing or reading is a real struggle; she can't use a computer – I think insisting on making a lot of formal job applications is a bit silly.*

As we have pointed out, however, it is entirely wrong to make generalisations about ESOL learners. It is clear that where learners are at the early stages in acquiring English skills, traditional BET courses may not be suitable for all learners. None-the-less Jobcentre Plus staff have found it remarkably easy to place many ESOL learners (*"very motivated, very able, English improving all the time – he could have got a dozen jobs!"*). Other learners have to overcome a range of disadvantages (not just ESOL, but maybe poor literacy and numeracy, personal and domestic needs) before anything above very basic employment becomes attainable.

8. STRANDS

Those responsible for managing and coordinating Pathfinders approached strands in a variety of ways, most of which evolved over time. Pathfinders typically gained experience in a range of 'strand-related' areas – even though they did not necessarily formally concentrate on them: most gained good experience of outreach, ICT-based approaches, working with low literacy learners, and embedding ESOL provision. Because of the importance of the strands in the Pathfinder concept, however, we give a brief summary of experiences within these areas, with some of the 'lessons learned'.

8.1 ICT

Overall, experiences of using ICT-based learning opportunities were amongst the most positive outcomes from Pathfinders (with good examples of embedding ESOL within ICT programmes, and using ICT-based techniques for effective learning coming from a range of Pathfinders, including West Yorkshire and Liverpool). The key challenges centred on a range of practical problems – essentially *"getting the kit to work as it should"* – along with giving teachers the skills they need. Pathfinders faced early-stage challenges in providing enough equipment, and not all technical challenges have yet been overcome (such as *"just getting things to run on our kit"* and in relation to accessing ELLIS).

Many learners were described as having found ICT-based learning attractive. It can be flexible, allowing you to 'go at your own pace', avoid problems if sessions are unavoidably missed, allow 'tasters' before definite learning decisions are made, and is often inherently attractive and *"something that I hope to be using in the future – in my job, at home, in my education"*.

A significant, and largely unforeseen, constraint has been the limited ICT capabilities reported by some teachers which colleges have largely responded to by providing specialist training and opportunities to share experiences both within and across training sites

As well as using networked ICT equipment in a classroom setting, interesting examples of using laptop equipment emerged, and techniques like electronic whiteboards were tried out. The key findings are, first, that these approaches do seem to be capable of generating good learning outcomes in many settings, but secondly, those basic requirements of access to

equipment, making sure it works properly, and training teachers appropriately are all essential ingredients.

8.2 Intensives

For some learners, intensive provision has been very attractive indeed. Younger people, particularly those with good levels of own-language literacy and numeracy, have responded well to intensive provision (e.g. 6-8 hours formal tuition per week, residential programmes), particularly when supplemented with assignments, ICT-based learning, and practice with friends). Intensive provision also offers important 'soft' benefits, including networking, building up confidence, group development and motivation.

Feedback from learners on residential intensive programmes has been particularly positive. They were not always easy for Pathfinders to organise (and are, by definition, more costly than non-residential programmes on a daily basis). It is essential to respect a wide range of sensitivities in relation to diet, other learners and a range of culture-specific issues. Again, however, there are opportunities to achieve good progress in a relatively short period of time, particularly from those who already have good, own-language levels of education, literacy and numeracy.

Clearly though, following the key point that ESOL learners vary widely, most teachers and Pathfinder managers are clear that there are categories of learners for whom intensive provision is not particularly appropriate. Amongst these groups are older people, particularly from the settled community, who have evolved a wide range of "*coping strategies without extensive use of English*". Here, a typical view would be that "*they need a long period with steady inputs – maybe over two years – to start to 'get out of the rut' and get used to using English on a daily basis*".

8.3 Vocational and Embedded ESOL

Most Pathfinders achieved useful experiences of offering vocationally focused learning. It was convenient for many colleges to embed some of their ESOL provision within established FE programmes (including childcare, hairdressing, catering, and photography) so that learners gained directly applicable language skills at the same time as they gained or developed 'useful' knowledge and skills. Feedback from learners has been good ("*they*

immediately see the relevance of learning, get motivated to apply what they've learned") and has already led to work-related outcomes (e.g. childminding at several locations including Burnley). West Yorkshire and Birmingham are amongst those developing 'double qualification' programmes – with learners being able to gain both vocational (e.g. NVQ2) qualifications and formally assess their English language capabilities (notably through the National Test).

Close links with the health sector were a particular feature of the Burnley Pathfinder; as elsewhere, this is a sector with appreciable recruitment needs, and – whilst short-term achievements have been limited – those working with this aspect of the Pathfinder remain confident that a number of local people not currently working can be helped to gain work in the health sector in future, through a combination of vocational training and ESOL. Further benefits have come from greater levels of health awareness – reinforcing a more general point that: *"vocational courses – cooking, sewing and so on – help people in the home, not just in work ..."*

Ideally, two teachers are appropriate for many vocational programmes – one to cover the 'technical' aspects of the course itself, the other with specific ESOL skills - but this clearly represents an appreciable extra cost. In some of the Pathfinders they were exploring the benefits and risks attached to using trained classroom assistants rather than fully qualified teachers.

As well as formal, college-based vocational programmes, good results have come from employer-based programmes (such as in Norfolk). Here, there are specific employment-related benefits (for example *"when the safety sign says 'don't do it' it's very important they know what they are not supposed to do!"*). In learning terms, however, the relevance and immediacy of the focus of the learning can promote good results.

Vocational programmes are, in many respects, examples of more general 'embedded' learning approaches. Although without a specific vocational dimension, it is worth noting that programmes like ESOL and sewing, ESOL and swimming were effective, not only in attracting learners into programmes, but in encouraging good levels of attainment.

As with vocational programmes, embedding ESOL learning into other programmes worked well, partly because of the inherent interest of many of the subjects to learners (not least ICT) but also because of the practicalities of the issues addressed. *"They don't just learn any words and phrases, they learn the words and phrases that apply to cooking – and*

they're very interested indeed in cooking!" Some questions might be asked about the extent of embedding – for example visits to galleries or discussions of different cooking styles might be seen as ‘bolted onto mainstream ESOL provision’ rather than representing a more fundamental shift in approach.

8.4 Low Literacy

It was always envisaged that low levels of own-language literacy would be a significant issue for Pathfinders to address. Nevertheless both the extent of low literacy and the challenges it represents have been appreciably greater than most expected. Individuals who have never been involved in any formal learning environment, who cannot recognise characters in any script, and who may barely have held a pen, face many challenges before they can participate effectively in ESOL classes.

Progress can be quick and significant numbers of people who are “*very bright, very quick-witted*” have come to light with no own-language literacy. But people with very low levels of own-language literacy may be very difficult to teach in a group setting and - ideally – need extensive one to one support and encouragement. Careful assessment and diagnosis have emerged as good practice, so that, for example, barriers caused by no writing skills, no ability to recognise any characters, or no experience of formal learning settings can be identified and addressed.

Key findings from the Pathfinder are, first, that the scale of low own-language literacy problems can be very significant indeed, and secondly that people with these characteristics are not necessarily easy to help through ‘conventional’ taught courses. There are effective learning plans that address low own-language literacy, but they may well be time-consuming and resource-intensive.

8.5 Jobcentre Plus

Most Pathfinders worked closely with Jobcentre Plus staff, whether this was part of a formal ‘strand’ or not. Activities centred on three elements: effective referring-on to appropriate support; training Jobcentre Plus staff and supporting Jobcentre Plus-funded programmes.

Training Jobcentre Plus front-line staff led to good results in several areas (especially Liverpool). Staff feedback centred on greater familiarity with the sorts of issues non-English speakers face when interacting with ‘officialdom’ and learning a number of basic

communication techniques. *“It probably makes staff more efficient because they waste less time; it definitely improves the quality of service because they have more empathy, present much more of a human face ...”*

Improved Jobcentre Plus staff training and briefing lead to more effective referring-on to support and IAG services. Visits to Jobcentres reinforced the learning messages for Jobcentre Plus staff, but also provided useful learning experiences for ESOL learners – not only helping them develop their language skills but helping them understand key procedures and opportunities too. In due course, several Pathfinder locations are hopeful that they will be able to recruit staff from ESOL programmes, and expect this to improve the service they offer to key client groups appreciably.

The fit between ‘standard’ Jobcentre Plus requirements and ESOL learners’ needs and circumstances is not always easy, however. Whilst formal programmes (primarily BET) seemingly can work well for many learners with limited English skills, this is far from universally the case. Individuals with very low levels of own-language literacy present particular challenges, and in several locations, Jobcentre Plus advisers were clear *“ESOL is only one of many issues they face ...”*

Some experimenting around ‘standard’ approaches was possible through the Pathfinders (e.g. providing additional ESOL support as part of BET in East London) and did seem to show promising results – albeit still within the main structures and timescales of these programmes.

Multi-agency working with Jobcentre Plus has not always been easy for ‘systems’ reasons. Most Jobcentre Plus targets are, in effect, fairly short-term and specific (*“basically, a job ...”*). Other agencies may well have longer-term, ‘softer’ aspirations (*“helping people gain confidence, help them get to the same sort of professional level they had at home ...”*). At best, interviewees were at pains to explain: *“Jobcentre Plus can show a degree of discretion and do accept that some people need a great deal of support before they are job-ready.”* At worst, there were concerns that *“all that matters is getting some sort of short-term job – whether people are ready for it or not, whether it uses their skills and qualifications or not ...”*

8.6 Outreach

On the whole, Pathfinders faced only limited, localised problems in recruiting appropriate numbers of ESOL learners – and many had to cut back their planned promotional work or

draw up waiting lists. More might have learned about outreach if greater efforts had been needed to gather in large numbers of learners. In practice - from the planning stage onwards - contacts with local voluntary and community groups usually proved effective in 'putting the word around' and attracting-in appreciable numbers of learners.

In terms of formal outreach work, the role of community and faith-based organisations emerged as important for many communities: *"It wouldn't be easy to get any Muslim women just to come along to the college, but working with the Islamic centre meant we soon had plenty of take-up..."*. Good outreach also responds to the specific needs of individual groups: for example, avoiding the inappropriateness of offering evening classes to those working in the restaurant trades. Most interviewees were clear that 'formal' marketing would probably be pointless for most ESOL provision; yet working through community and voluntary groups, and encouraging existing learners to *"tell a friend"* is, typically, capable of generating high levels of demand.

The only caveats to raise are, first, the possibility that good outreach may encourage learners to sign up to more than one programme *"to be sure of getting on one"* – which is one of the causes of allocated places eventually not being filled. Secondly, with places often *"filling themselves"* a number of partners were prone to constrain active outreach, but speculate: *"I bet there's a load more people out there we don't know anything about ... I wonder if we're working with those in greatest need..."*.

8.7 Training Teachers/Mentors

Feedback from specific teaching activities was typically good: in many cases, teachers' interests centred on *"learning from others, finding out what other people are doing, building up your own confidence and hearing about what others are doing"*, rather than benefits from specific instructional points – although clearly both were accepted as being valuable. The new curriculum was of recurring interest (and support). Techniques like diagnosis and assessment were also of great interest (and particularly prone to comments about *"Can we be sure we're doing it right?"*)

More established teachers often reported a significant 'backlog' of training and development ranging from ICT training through to updating on current materials and techniques. Pathfinder activities resolved only a proportion of this backlog, and more needs to be done. Now that there is a range of accepted qualifications for ESOL teaching unprecedented

opportunities are available for offering accredited professional development to established ESOL teachers.

With much Pathfinder provision coming through FE routes, a high proportion of new teachers already had good formal qualifications – mainly with first/higher degrees and PGCE and other teaching qualifications. Individuals here tended to need support in relation to the specifics of ESOL training and, ideally, start to build up their repertoire of practical expertise. Teacher training was useful here, although considerable benefits have also come through the many dissemination events organised by Pathfinders to share learning within and outside the Pathfinder.

8.8 Flexible delivery

There is a danger in saying that virtually all ESOL learning should be ‘flexible’ – fitting around the needs of individuals who may well need to attend to many other issues (health, family matters, legal processes, etc). This can be very difficult to manage however, and may be expensive and unsettling for other class members too – and many ESOL learners can easily come to regularly arranged classes in formal settings.

Nevertheless, the Pathfinders point to important benefits from offering particular kinds of flexibility: roll-on/roll-off courses not necessarily tied to the academic year were particularly valuable for recent arrivals. ICT-based courses are attractive to those who cannot necessarily attend all taught lessons and maybe have the time available to work on their own initiative. Flexibility in teaching location is attractive too: *“things go a lot better in the... (Community centre): I think people are more relaxed, much more ready to go there than to college which they find a bit off-putting”*. Again, however, an ideal approach seems to be offering a varied range of ESOL learning options. Many learners will prefer regular, structured approaches, but high levels of flexibility are attractive to a significant proportion.

9. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

9.1 Conclusions

Overall conclusions centre on Pathfinders having provided very positive opportunities for a very wide range of partners to trial a range of new materials and ways of working. Partnership working *per se* has mostly been rewarding and added value – albeit often at the cost of taking time. The ‘agendas’ of different organisations are often different in relation to ESOL, as with much else. By the end of the Pathfinder period partnership working has emerged as a significant strength for many Pathfinders – particularly through forging links with organisations like Jobcentre Plus, employers and community groups not always linked effectively into learning programmes in the past.

DfES support has been important, particularly through facilitating all-Pathfinder meetings, and agreeing extensions to initial timescales when ‘slippage’ became apparent. Some of the Pathfinders reported a wish for “*more of a lead from DfES,*” for example in relation to project management and internal evaluation frameworks. Giving significant discretion to local Pathfinders was a deliberate ABSSU policy: indeed it might well be argued that too much of a ‘steer’ from DfES would have inhibited experimentation and learning within local Pathfinders, and on balance we agree with this view.

At a detailed level, Pathfinders have had to contend with a range of resource constraints, including insufficient teacher numbers, a backlog of teacher training and development and – often – a certain amount of difficulty getting enough classroom space and support. On the other hand, Pathfinders have developed or shared very high levels of typically good-quality learning materials and other tools.

The late arrival of national diagnostic assessment materials caused problems for those planning and delivering ESOL learning through the Pathfinders. Although short-term problems were resolved (usually by developing or using locally-produced materials) we recommend that DfES monitor the longer-term impact of using national materials, including how they are received by teachers and learners, over the coming months. Work by the

NRDC is currently underway researching how teachers are currently using the new materials.

The key to effective overall ESOL provision within the Pathfinders has typically been to provide a varied range of ESOL options, and this pattern ought to be the norm for wider rolling out of the 'Pathfinder message'. In practice, good results have come from all of the 'strands' – provided a number of key characteristics (e.g. no major problems with location or venue; effective teaching styles and materials) were in place. Intensive, embedded, vocational and other kinds of provision all have their part to play for some learners. There have been particular challenges to overcome when working with people having little or no own-language literacy, who have needed particularly intensive support (such as significant 1:1 elements) before they can make appreciable progress.

Employer involvement in ESOL provision has worked well in a number of locations. Ignoring any altruistic motives, there are straightforward attractions to both employees and employers though improved productivity, the capability for working at several different tasks, and improved Health and Safety performance.

Recruiting ESOL learners has not been a problem for most Pathfinders – indeed for the majority, demand for courses has clearly outstripped supply. Typically demand has increased as a result of the partners promoting the provision via their strong links into key groups – whether colleges with waiting lists or community / voluntary groups who can 'put the word around.' Crucially, however, word-of-mouth referrals have brought in significant numbers of learners from both the settled communities and from new arrivals in the UK.

Overall, the Pathfinders have confirmed the high levels of demand for ESOL provision – which seems to exist more or less across the whole of England. They have also identified positive reactions from learners able to access good quality ESOL provision – and the strong probability that major benefits will ensue in personal, social and economic terms. There is now good evidence of many Pathfinder activities being 'mainstreamed' or taken forward in other ways (such as through ESF-supported programmes).

9.2 Recommendations

Our recommendations can be grouped at 3 levels – for individual organisations, local partnerships and wider issues (i.e. primarily for DfES).

Partners within individual Pathfinders will usually now have appreciable resources, materials, expertise, trained staff and contacts to draw on. Attention will still need to be given, however, to training teachers, developing and embedding new lesson materials, increased attention to rigorous diagnostic assessment approaches, continuing to share good practice and learning from experience.

For local partnerships, where these arrangements are continuing: further work to share good practice, encouragement to engage ‘stakeholders’ who are not part of mainstream training and education routes (particularly employers, voluntary / community groups, Jobcentre Plus) should actively be promoted. Constraints are likely to arise over effective communication and coordination, and these roles need to be appropriately resourced.

At a national level, work to develop further a number of initiatives should be considered seriously. These are the national diagnostic assessment material, ELLIS and the TALENT (ESOL) website. In addition, support for disseminating experiences and materials generated through the Pathfinders should continue.

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